



In gesture, Turkey conserving Armenian churches

By **Matthew Hay Brown**

MAY 4, 2011, 7:35 AM

Associated Press correspondent *Selcan Hacaoglu* reports:

Turkey has launched a project to conserve an ancient Armenian cathedral and church in what is seen as a gesture of reconciliation toward its neighbor.

Turkey and Armenia have been locked in a bitter dispute for decades over the mass killings of Armenians in Turkey in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Efforts to normalize relations have been dealt a setback by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan is a close Muslim ally of Turkey.

Turkey, however, says it is committed to improving ties with Armenia, and has already restored the 10th century Akdamar church, perched on a rocky island in Lake Van in

eastern Turkey. It has also allowed once-yearly worship at the site as a gesture to Armenia and its own ethnic Armenian minority.

Culture Minister Ertugrul Gunay said Tuesday the new project was being launched in partnership with the World Monuments Fund to conserve the remains of the cathedral and the Church of the Holy Savior in Ani, 25 miles (40 kilometers) from the eastern Turkish city of Kars.

According to the New York-based World Monuments Fund, Ani — "one of the world's great cities in the 10th century" — was once the site of hundreds of religious buildings, palaces, fortifications, and other structures. Today it stands abandoned, and the remnants of its celebrated buildings are in a precarious state.

The site, in an earthquake-prone area, has been listed on the World Monuments Watch since 1996.

"Ani, which is of global significance, presents particularly complicated challenges," Gunay said. "We hope that giving new life to the remains of once-splendid buildings, such as the Ani Cathedral and church, will bring new economic opportunities to the region." The Turkish government recently completed restoration of the Church of Tigran Honents' and the Mosque of Manucehr, converted from a church by invading Seljuk Turks at Ani, which is situated right on the Turkish-Armenian border.

The area was long off-limits in a militarized area, which has been gradually demilitarized since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, it attracts tourists from around the world.

The new conservation work will primarily aim to strengthen the Ani Cathedral and the Church of the Holy Savior against temblors, said Bonnie Burnham, the president of WMF.

The cathedral, designed by Trdat — the chief architect of the Bagratuni kings of Armenia who rebuilt the dome of Istanbul's huge Hagia Sophia church following an earthquake in the late 10th century — is considered to be a masterpiece of medieval Armenian architecture, the fund says. Earthquakes have completely collapsed the building's central dome as well as its northwest corner.

Like the cathedral, the church also suffered severe quake damage and a 1930 lightning strike collapsed the southeast side of the building, Burnham said in a statement.

Rainwater and melting snow has seeped through the collapsed dome of the cathedral and the damaged church, washing away biblical frescoes from one of the finest surviving monuments of ancient Armenian culture. A steel structure prevents the cracked sandstone walls of the cathedral from collapsing.

However, some of the elaborate reliefs remain, projecting from the cathedral's rust-colored walls. Some depict biblical stories; others show lions, birds and other animals to remind worshippers that the church is an image of paradise.

"There has long been international concern about the fragile condition of the many extraordinary ruins at Ani," said Burnham. "We hope that this work will usher in a new era in the life of this important site."

According to the fund, Ani reached its cultural golden age in the second half of the 10th century, when it became the political and commercial center of the Bagratid Armenian kingdom. At its height, its population exceeded 100,000 people, the fund said. By the mid-11th century, the city began to decline due to internal strife, earthquakes and invasions by various groups, including Seljuk Turks.

The culture minister did not say whether Turkey would also allow prayers at Ani once the

restoration is complete. The ministry on Wednesday would not reveal the estimated cost of the project, which is also supported by the U.S. Department of State's Ambassadors Fund as well as the WMF.

Osman Kavala, head of the Anadolu Kultur, a non-governmental culture organization that helps coordinate the partnership with the WMF, said preparations for the actual restoration work are expected to cost US\$1 million (euro672,000) alone. He said the restoration is likely to start as early as 2012 and is expected to take four years.

"This project is significant to protect the world's cultural heritage," Kavala said Wednesday. "But being on the border, it might also serve as a bridge to improve relations between Turkey and Armenia."

Armenians say up to 1.5 million Armenians were killed by Ottoman Turks around the time of World War I, which they call the first genocide of the 20th century. Turkey disputes this, saying the death toll has been inflated and those killed were victims of civil war and unrest as the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

Copyright © 2017, The Baltimore Sun, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | Place an Ad

This article is related to: [Europe](#), [Turkey](#), [Middle East](#), [Architecture](#)



BE THE FIRST TO COMMENT